PLAYACTING HAPPINESS: TRAGICOMEDY IN JANE AUSTEN'S *MANSFIELD PARK* AND ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *CRANFORD*

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines tragicomedy in two 19th Century British novels, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*. Both narratives have perceived happy endings; however, tragedy lies underneath the surface. With Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a starting point, playacting becomes the vehicle through which tragedy can be discovered by the reader. Throughout, I find examples in which playacting begins as a comedic act, but acquires tragic potential when parents enter the scene. Here, I define tragedy not as a dramatic experience, but rather seemingly small injustices that, over time, cause more harm than good. In *Mansfield Park*, the tragedy is parental neglect and control. In *Cranford*, the tragedy is parental abuse. For both narratives, characters are unable to experience life fully, and past parental injuries cannot be redeemed. While all the children in the narratives experience some form of parental neglect, the marginalized children are harmed more than the others. In addition, I find that lifelong loneliness is a common theme in both narratives, showing that tragedy can lead to grief experienced in isolation.

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Introduction

In Fall 2016 I completed a 19th Century British Literature course on "The Greatest Storytellers." In the course I kept returning to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*. As I reread and examined the texts, I started to notice how the novels juxtaposed tragic and comedic elements. For the final research paper, I examined tragicomedy in the two texts in light of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. My thesis is an expansion of that research paper. I chose to expand on these two texts because the stories appear ordinary and humorous at first, yet hidden tragedies lie underneath the surface. Austen and Gaskell's texts have several similarities to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. All three texts are considered "comedies" in the Greek sense; they incorporate humor, ordinary people with weaknesses, and a happy ending. Most important for my purpose, all three texts include playacting, which in turn allows or provides a vehicle for tragedy to enter the comedic world. For *Midsummer*, the performance after a wedding reflects the tragedy of forbidden love. For Austen and Gaskell's texts, playacting is a form of child rebellion, provoking parental neglect, control, or abuse.

Parental control is prevalent throughout Austen's *Mansfield Park*. The text illuminates this parental "colonialism" through the coming-of-age story of Fanny Price. At a young age, Fanny is taken from her home in Portsmouth to live with her relatives at Mansfield Park. The narrative is an inverted bildungsroman, as Fanny's maturity and education are enforced by her guardian uncle, aunts, and cousins, the Bertrams and Mrs. Norris. Rather than a story of discovery and growth, the story highlights the ill-treatment of a vulnerable adolescent. Fanny does not experience transformation; rather her situation only changes for the better through a fortunate circumstance. While Fanny's marriage to her cousin Edmund Bertram should be a favorable ending, her marriage solidifies the Bertram family's ownership of her.

In contrast, *Cranford* focuses on a community of women in the fictional town, Cranford. Mary Smith, the narrator and cultural anthropologist of the town, documents the town's events, people, and society. Whether unmarried or widowed, the Cranford women elevate the insignificant to importance; domestic and trivial everyday activities set the scene and seemingly commonplace characters take center stage. Miss Matty, the town's central figure, is highly regarded in the community. An ordinary matron, Miss Matty has no notable accomplishments, but her steadfast character makes her a cornerstone in the community. What sets this town apart from others is the fact that women run the town, not men. In fact, men are not welcome in the Cranford community. The town, however, makes one exception, when Miss Matty's estranged brother, Peter Jenkyns, returns to Cranford. Peter was driven out of Cranford in his youth. Decades later, Mary contacts Peter during Miss Matty's hour of need. Peter's return to Cranford and his reunion with his sister, Miss Matty, concludes the novel.

At first or even second glance, *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford* do not appear tragic. Both texts were written by women writers and have women protagonists. In the context of 19th Century British (and American) literature, novels with women protagonists generally resolve with the major women characters united in matrimony with the "right" or "perfect" partner. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854), and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868)[1], are examples of 19th Century novels by women writers that resolve in the marriages of the women characters. An exception from this list is George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Eliot's *The Mill on*

[1] Alcott's *Little Women* has one exception, Beth, who does pass away in the novel, placing marriage and death in proximity with one another.

the Floss is tragic in the Greek sense, for despite everything, Maggie's deepest love remains for her brother, leading to her death. Like Sophocles' Antigone, Maggie sacrifices her life for her brother. *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford* do not fit into either of these molds easily. The two novels do not align with Greek tragedy like *The Mill on the Floss*, but they also certainly do not end in happy marriages. Rather, the two texts resolve with the women characters either single, divorced, widowed, or in an incestuous marriage. In essence, *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford* create a new way of viewing tragicomedy outside of the traditional plot in which marriage or death defines how a text is categorized.

When thinking about the concepts of tragedy and comedy, Shakespeare's plays come to mind. Shakespeare's plays lay a foundation for how we think about tragedy and comedy in British literature. For instance, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Much Ado About Nothing* are examples of comedy. All three plays take the audience through events in which something is at stake, but the ending is one of marriage or reunion. In all three plays, the "right" couples are, or are soon to be, united in marriage. *Twelfth Night* also concludes with a sibling reunion. In contrast, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, are examples of tragedy. In these three plays, the tragedy results in the downfall of the protagonist, usually through an error in judgement. Hamlet's revenge, Macbeth's ambition, and Othello's jealousy - all result in multiple deaths including that of the protagonist. Shakespeare's plays show that a comedy ends in marriage or reunion for the principle players, while a tragedy ends in death.

The two novels I am working with would generally be considered comic. Like Shakespeare's comedies, *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford* end with all problems apparently solved, and a marriage or reunion takes place. *Mansfield Park* ends with the right people getting married, Fanny and Edmund. Fanny is the protagonist and Edmund is the son who has gone down the

"right" path. The characters with problematic natures, Henry and Mary Crawford, also get the ending they deserve according to comedy, in the sense that they are left unhappy and unmarried at the novel's conclusion. While there are no marriages in *Cranford*, the novel does end with a reunion between Miss Matty and her brother, Peter. The return of Peter also means that Miss Matty's financial troubles are now resolved. For both novels, the readers are left believing that unity and peace has been achieved in these two worlds.

Yet while these two novels may be considered comic, the tragedy is not washed away. While no dramatic deaths occur at the conclusion of the novels, the personal natures of the characters lead them to make wrong decisions with sometimes terrible results, especially for themselves. In *Mansfield Park*, some of the Bertram and Crawford children make choices that lead them to their downfall. Tom Bertram's recklessness almost kills him, Maria (Bertram) Rushworth and Henry Crawford commit adultery and are banished from the Park, and Mary Crawford schemes and loses her chance at marrying a Bertram. In *Cranford*, Miss Matty is so haunted by her parents and sister's sense of what is right that she is unable to pursue her own happiness. As a young woman, Miss Matty was in love with Mr. Holbrook, a farmer. Her family did not approve, and thus the relationship was broken off. Many years later, Miss Matty is given a second chance to reunite with Mr. Holbrook, but she chooses not to rekindle the relationship. This time, however, she has broken her own heart.

In both *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford*, the greatest tragedy is that the main characters cannot experience *eudaimonia*, or Aristotle's concept of a "flourishing" good life. In both novels, no new life is born, parents dismantle amusement, and dreams are deferred. In *Mansfield Park*, this is clearly seen through the Bertram and Crawford children. They have no purpose, passions, or employment. When they choose to occupy themselves by performing a play for the

neighborhood, Sir Thomas returns home and stops the play they have worked so hard for. In *Cranford*, Miss Matty desires more in life, but chooses not to pursue her dreams. Stunted by the past, Miss Matty's quality of life is diminished and lonely.

Tragicomedy matters because while classification schemes may exist, perhaps they are not all that important. We might assign a category, like an identity or genre, but that limits our opportunity to view the narrative fully. Today, Shakespeare's plays are divided into comedies, tragedies, histories, and romances. However, dividing them into these categories is not true to the playwright and his plays. The comedies, romances, and histories all contain elements of tragedy; the tragedies, romances, and histories all contain elements of comedy. For example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy, but the Pyramus and Thisbe play-within-a-play is a tragedy not only because the play ends in the deaths of the two lovers, but because it shows what could potentially happen to Hermia if she chooses to marry Lysander against her father's wishes: being sent to the convent (a figurative death) or executed (a literal death). The same phenomena hold true for *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford*. While Austen and Gaskell depict these two worlds as comic, the tragic components of the novels reveal that these worlds do contain darker themes: parental abuse, women unable to live the life they wanted, and lifelong loneliness.

Mansfield Park was first published in *1814*, *Cranford* in 1853, and the settings of the two novels are also about thirty-five years apart. *Mansfield Park* is about a group of English gentility in their youth, while *Cranford* is about a group of (real or imagined) English gentility in their advanced years. In thirty-forty years, the young adults at Mansfield Park will be close to the same age as the major characters in Cranford. *Mansfield Park* is youthful, while *Cranford* is aging.

Together, the two novels show the change and decline in status across time. *Mansfield Park* highlights an era of grand estates, the gentry, and the height of colonialism. *Cranford*, on the other hand, shows the gradual fall of the upper classes that inherited their wealth or gained it through colonial enterprise. *Mansfield Park*'s great estates, abundance of wealth, and high-class society all represent what the elderly Cranford women did not or no longer have. *Cranford* has "decayed" fortunes and aging characters; the world of *Mansfield Park* no longer exists.

While these are important differences between the texts, the texts are also crucially similar. Both texts are written by female authors whose fathers were church leaders. Jane Austen's father was a rector in the Anglican church (Austen ix) while Elizabeth Gaskell's father was a minister in the Unitarian church (Lansbury 11). Both texts have male characters who are church leaders or who are training to be church leaders. The financial and social position of the church is significant because church rectors and ministers were normally the younger sons who did not inherit their father's fortunes. English primogeniture kept estates and titles intact by not allowing women or younger sons to inherit property or titles.

A painful reality in both texts is the fact that all of the women must depend on men for their welfare and well-being. Most of the women in the two texts do not marry and may never (or have missed the opportunity to) have children. At *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford*'s end, Mary Crawford, the Bertram family's friend, and Mary Smith, the narrator, have both passed the age in which they are likely to draw martial interest or intent, limiting their biological chance to bear offspring. *Cranford*'s Mary Smith does not seem to care that she is unlikely to marry or have children, showing that she has been influenced by the Cranford women. In contrast, *Mansfield Park's* Mary Crawford is upset when she loses her opportunity to marry Edmund Bertram. Likewise, Maria (Bertram) Rushworth is distraught when she is divorced and outcast, for her

chances of re-marriage and bearing children are slim. *Cranford's* Miss Pole, the Miss Jenkyns, and Miss Betty Barker show what *Mansfield Park*'s Mary Crawford and Maria (Bertram) Rushworth are destined to become: single, genteel (or with a pretension to gentility) women with no money and no children.

Yet while both texts have single, childless women, the characters serve the role of proxy mothers and spouses for each other. As Margaret Case Croskery says, "[T]he raw maternal instinct manifests itself just below the tangible outlines of plot and character, residing instead in Cranford's repeated emphasis on rescuing or retrieving children" (207). Croskery's analysis of *Cranford* also holds true for *Mansfield Park*. *Cranford's* Mary Smith and *Mansfield Park's* Fanny Price do not have a close relationship with their biological mothers, but the women in their communities come in to fill that role for them, even if those women are not perfect maternal characters. Peter's return to Cranford also provides an opportunity for the women in Cranford to "mother" him. Similarly, Peter and Miss Matty are able to mutually take care of each other in their old age, filling the role that a husband or wife would have if either of them was married. Thus, while the tragedy is that the women in these two narratives may never marry or have children, they find new innovative ways to employ themselves as surrogate mothers and spouses.

The inappropriate or unjustified imposition of strict moral guidelines, with at times tragic results, also plays a role in both novels. For both texts, morality is defined and controlled by the father figures, and "immoral" playacting is eradicated by paternal authorities. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price's guardian uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, rules his household with an iron hand. He is described as a "truly anxious father, he was not outwardly affectionate, and the reserve of his manner repressed all the flow of their spirits before him" (20). In the Bertram household, there is

an absence of parental involvement. While Sir Thomas is in Antigua overseeing his colonial enterprise, his children and their friends are at home practicing a play about infidelity. When Sir Thomas returns home, he immediately terminates the playacting. Similarly, Miss Matty and Peter Jenkyns' father, a minister in Cranford, lays down the law when he beats Peter in public for playacting as an illegitimate mother with her baby. Sir Thomas' actions are jarringly similar to Mr. Jenkyns' public hostility towards Peter's playacting in *Cranford*. When Sir Thomas and Mr. Jenkyns enter on the playacting scenes, they cause tragic ends to the comedic game.

In the following two chapters, I will explore tragicomedy in the novel form. Austen and Gaskell use the forms of playacting and entertainment to demonstrate the comedic elements of these two worlds. However, when the playacting and entertainment is prohibited by paternal figures, the tragic features of the two worlds appear. Austen uses setting to show the complexity of the tragicomic world of the novel. In contrast, Gaskell uses everyday occurrences to depict the novel's world as a comedy, while blending in tragic stories. Both *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford* address what occurs when parents or guardians abuse or control the children under their care. The tragedy is that the parents and adult figures are neglecting their children's needs. Aristotle claims that what a family member can do to another is the worst betrayal. In this case, the adults are the ones abandoning the children for whom they are responsible. While the physical or emotional abuse and neglect may be unintentional, they cause unforeseen consequences, including lifelong loneliness and the ending of family lines. Throughout the next two chapters, I endeavor to show that tragedy is not just a horrific action, such as violent death (which can be considered a physical embodiment of tragedy). Tragedy can also grow from micro-betrayals, in which small, consistent actions over time can lead to chronic affliction or loss in a family or community.

Chapter 1

Mansfield Park demonstrates how playacting can be both comedic and tragic. *Mansfield Park* is more complex than it has been considered, mingling disparate elements into the density of a tragicomedy. The first of Austen's novels that was drafted and revised exclusively during her adult years (Johnson 105), this text shows Austen's maturity and growth as a writer. *Mansfield Park* is also one of the only novels that Austen revised and published in a second edition, the first edition published in 1814 and the second in 1816 (Austen 465). In this chapter I will explore two ways in which comedy and tragedy intermingle in the novel, first, through the text's setting, and second, through the characters of Fanny Price and Mary Crawford.

Mansfield Park and Sotherton are the two estates featured in the novel. Mansfield Park is owned by Sir Thomas Bertram, a baronet, who also owns an estate in Antigua. Sir Thomas is married to Lady Maria Bertram, and they have four young adult children: Tom, Edmund, Maria, and Julia. Sotherton is owned by Mr. James Rushworth, a young aristocrat who is just beginning to develop his property. The setting mostly takes place in the two estates. Homes of the upper class, on the outside, the estates appear sophisticated and refined. However, when the text moves to Portsmouth, the uncivilized and uncultured port town, the setting indirectly reflects the corruption of the two estates. Portsmouth's physical dirtiness and parental neglect shines a light on the emotional neglect and abuse that occurs on the grounds of Mansfield Park and Sotherton.

Fanny Price and Mary Crawford, two outsiders, come to Mansfield Park as vulnerable women. Both experience varying forms of neglect and abuse based on their background and positions in the upper-class community. Fanny and Mary are like foster children because they are under the care of relatives rather than their biological parents. In the care of guardians, they are

not treated like adopted children, that is, permanent members of the family. Fanny is, in essence, "fostered out" to her uncle and aunt, Sir and Lady Bertram, as a young girl. Fanny is not treated as one of the other children (her cousins), and there is no promise that her stay with the Bertrams will be a prolonged one. Mary is also "fostered out" to various relatives. After their mother passes away, Mary and her brother Henry live with their uncle and aunt in London. However, Mary is not loved by her uncle, so when her aunt passes away, she eventually has to leave his care when he chooses to bring his mistress into the home. After Henry and Mary leave their uncle's home in London, they are invited to stay with their older half-sister, Mrs. Grant, and her husband, Dr. Grant, at the parsonage they have recently purchased adjacent to Mansfield Park.

Mansfield Park is described as having open spaces and big places. Everything is grand, and there are multiple rooms and passageways in which to hide and keep secrets. When Fanny first arrives at Mansfield Park as a ten-year-old, she is in awe and terror:

> The grandeur of the house astonished but could not console her. The rooms were too large for her to move in with ease; whatever she touched she expected to injure, and she crept about in constant terror of something or other; often retreating towards her own chamber to cry; and the little girl who was spoken of in the drawing-room when she left it at night, as seeming so desirably sensible of her peculiar good fortune, ended every day's sorrows by sobbing herself to sleep. (15)

The sublime estate would likely terrify any young child from another sort of family, but since this is the reader's first introduction to the heroine, it portrays her from the beginning as weak and lonely.

Fanny is Austen's only protagonist that we meet as a child, suggesting that her education and upbringing are essential to understanding her character. Fanny is placed in the East Room, the schoolroom and attic of the house - away from everyone else and in a place of education. The unwelcome and frightening environment of the grand estate mirrors the prejudice and hostility Fanny experiences as a child from her relatives. Her environment is controlled by others, particularly her widowed aunt, Mrs. Norris, who lives with the Bertrams, and is the one that encourages Fanny's relocation to Mansfield Park in the first place. Mrs. Norris does not allow fires to be lit in Fanny's room even when it is cold. An example of Mrs. Norris' malice can be seen in an exchange she has with her nieces, Maria and Julia:

> "But, aunt, she is really so very ignorant! - Do you know, we asked her last night, which way she would go to get to Ireland; and she said, she should cross to the Isle of Wight...and she calls it *the Island*, as if there were no other island in the world. I am sure I should have been ashamed of myself, if I had not known better long before I was so old as she is…"
>
> "...But I must tell you another thing of Fanny, so odd and so stupid. Do you know, she says she does not want to learn either music or drawing."
>
> "To be sure, my dear, that is very stupid indeed, and shews a great want of genius and emulation. But all things considered, I do not know whether it is not as well that it should be so, for, though you know (owing to me) your papa and mamma are so good as to bring her up with you, it is not at all necessary that she should be as accomplished as you are; - on the contrary, it is much more desirable that there should be a difference." (19)

Mrs. Norris takes all the credit for bringing Fanny in as a charity case, while consistently being harsh towards her and emphasizing that she should be treated differently from her cousins. In addition, Mrs. Norris encourages her nieces to treat Fanny as less than equal.

While Mrs. Norris, Maria, and Julia convey their hostile feelings towards Fanny in loud and varying ways, Sir Thomas Bertram, Lady Bertram, and Tom Bertram condescend to her indirectly. Sir Thomas enunciates from the beginning that "she is not a *Miss Bertram*" and will always be different from his daughters in "rank, fortune, rights, and expectations" (12). Lady Bertram sits on a sofa all day and only cares about her lap dog, treating Fanny like a quasi-servant. Tom barely notices Fanny. Edmund Bertram is the only one who notices Fanny's suffering, but his kindness cannot compensate for the others' hostility. Thus, our first entrance to Mansfield Park is characterized by a tragic potential. While the Bertrams and Mrs. Norris believe they are being compassionate by taking Fanny in, their treatment of Fanny suggests that her time at Mansfield Park may not be any better than at her home in Portsmouth.

Fanny's childhood at Mansfield Park is skimmed over in one chapter, with the main part of the novel focuses on her adolescent or young adult years. We are quickly introduced to new characters: Mr. Rushworth, the landowner of Sotherton, and Mary and Henry Crawford, who are staying with Dr. and Mrs. Grant, the local parson and his wife. Mr. Rushworth is rich, boring, foolish, and ignorant. Sotherton, a large estate, is the location for the ongoing dialogue on "improvement," both in a humorous and disturbing fashion (54). The conversation about improving Sotherton is the first time we see many of the cast of characters together in one space. Mr. Rushworth invites Henry to visit Sotherton and give his opinion of the estate. Mary, Mrs. Norris, the Bertram children, and Fanny are all invited to join the outing. Mr. Rushworth is garrulous, Mrs. Norris is embarrassed, Mary makes crude jokes, and excitement builds as the

group makes arrangements to visit Sotherton. Fanny, and to some extent Edmund, are the only two who are not infatuated with the concept of improvement. In "Sotherton and the Geography of Empire: The Landscapes of *Mansfield Park*," Lynn Voskuil illuminates Mr. Rushworth's desire to improve his estate:

> What *is* naturalized … is the unquestioned proprietary right of Rushworth to alter the landscape—a landscape that includes entire families and villages—to suit both his optical and social perspective. His perspective, in short, is imperialist in its sensibility, and it is echoed variably in Britain during this era of imperial expansion. (598)

Not only will improving the landscape make the estate more aesthetically pleasing, but it also demonstrates his power over his tenants and property.

One of the landscape ideas brought up in the conversation is the removal of an avenue of trees. Mr. Rushworth, easily influenced by others, discusses how old trees at a friend's estate were removed, opening "the prospect amazingly," suggesting that the eradication of trees enlarged the space and provided a better view (53). Mr. Rushworth considers taking down his own avenue of trees, emphasizing that he has "a good seven hundred acres" compared to his friend, who only has a little over one hundred (53). By removing the trees, Mr. Rushworth will turn the natural landscape into a domesticated and tame area. Mr. Rushworth's ideas for improvement not only show that he is a trend follower, but that he desires for himself and others to see how expansive and cultivated his property is.

As the young people of Mansfield Park flippantly discuss the improvement of estates, the underlying question of Fanny's "improvement" quietly and disturbingly follows behind. Austen makes this connection clear. Fanny is told that she does not need to exercise every day to keep

up her strength like the other upper-class women, yet is quickly and ironically told that "every sort of exercise fatigues her so soon" (89). Fanny's education also shows that she is another object that the upper class is improving. In the same way that Rushworth, the Crawfords, the Bertrams, and Mrs. Norris discuss the improvement of Sotherton, the narrator discusses Fanny's education at Mansfield Park. Sotherton is described as a "dismal old prison," "forlorn" (51), and "ill placed" (53), that needs "improvement," "judgement," and "opinion" (58). Likewise, Fanny is out-of-place and lonely in Mansfield Park, where she is educated, or "improved." For example, Austen describes how Edmund educates Fanny:

> Kept back as she was by every body else, his single support could not bring her forward, but his attentions were otherwise of the highest importance in assisting the improvement of her mind, and extending its pleasures. He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which properly directed, must be an education in itself. Miss Lee taught her French and heard her read the daily portion of History, but he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgement; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read and heightened its attraction by judicious praise. (22)

In the same way that Mr. Rushworth desires to improve his estate (and Sir Thomas pursues imperial gain at his Antigua estate), Fanny is also the Bertrams' imperial object to improve and govern. Edmund's instruction, while using kind words and gestures, replicates the way his father and Mr. Rushworth run their estates, proving that the imperialistic attitude extends even to him. Austen shows that just as the estates' "natural" landscapes are actually constructed and manufactured for the enjoyment of the upper class, the Bertrams taking in Fanny is meant to instruct and educate her for the use of her benefactors.

Austen's comparison of the "natural" landscapes of Mansfield Park and Sotherton highlights the fusing of tragicomedy. The open spaces of the estates are a playful and hurtful battleground for the many couples and their love affairs. Mansfield's open spaces are the place in which Edmund and Mary's romantic relationship buds, but also where Edmund and Fanny's sibling relationship dissipates. When the young people explore Mr. Rushworth's estate, Sotherton, the landscape becomes a playground for sneaking, snooping, and deceit. The party starts by separating into groups of three. Mrs. Rushworth and Mrs. Norris stay around the estate and talk with a servant while Julia tries to get away and catch up with her sister. Fanny, Edmund, and Mary take a "serpentine" course through the woods until Fanny is too tired to follow (89). Mr. Rushworth, Henry, and Maria discuss improvement until Maria declares she wants to break free from the "restraint and hardship" of the gated woods, forcing Mr. Rushworth to retreat to the estate for the gate key (93). By the end, the groups are broken up into couples and lonely individuals irrationally running in circles around each other.

As the groups separate, Austen uses the Sotherton landscape to portray and foreshadow the climax of the novel: Maria and Henry's adultery and the downfall that is to come afterward. When Fanny is left on a bench, she begins to have "disagreeable musings" as she watches Edmund and Mary wander off unchaperoned and alone (94). Sitting center stage twenty minutes later, Fanny becomes the audience for Maria's "slipping into the Ha-Ha," as Maria walks off into the unrestrained and ungated part of the park with Henry, leaving Mr. Rushworth behind (93). Fanny warns Maria, but the warning comes too late:

> "You will hurt yourself, Miss Bertram," she cried, "you will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes- you will tear your gown- you will be in danger of slipping into the Ha-Ha. You had better not go."

> Her cousin was safe on the other side, while these words were spoken, and smiling with all the good-humor of success she said, "Thank you, my dear Fanny, but I and my gown are alive and well, and so goodbye." (93)

Maria's escape from Mr. Rushworth and his gated woods with Henry succeeds, but Fanny's warning foreshadows the hurt and danger Maria will face when she escapes with Henry the second time. By going outside the gate, Maria and Henry leave Mr. Rushworth's cultivated woods for the untamed landscape ahead. The action shows that Maria is a risk-taker, willing, by implication, to engage in sexual relations, as she is walking around alone with a man to whom she is not betrothed. In "Slipping into the Ha-Ha: Metatextuality, Performance, and the Farce of *Mansfield Park*" Jennarae Niece reflects that "the subtextual references to loss of virginity are cruder than what one might expect from the Austen novel most praised for its morality" (237-238). Yet perhaps Austen wants to shock us. Austen's attention to the Sotherton landscape is purposeful: it becomes a mini-theatrical production, turning a realistic, supposedly moral, story into a tragicomic performance.

The Sotherton woods episode imitates Shakespeare's woodsy setting in his play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In *A Midsummer*, the lovers go into the forest to escape the Athenian rules and authority, only to find chaos and to fight over each other. When they come out of the forest, the play resolves with joyful wedding celebrations. At the wedding banquet, a group of laborers perform Pyramus and Thisbe, a play-within-a-play about forbidden love and violence. Austen imitates *A Midsummer* a second time, when she follows this trope by incorporating, "Lover's Vows" into the context of her novel, coupling a novel about love and marriage with a-play-within-a-novel about sexual immorality and illegitimate children.

Setting continues to develop as an important tragic and comedic device when the young people of Mansfield Park transform the estate into a place of mischief and playacting for the production of "Lover's Vows." A scene painter is hired, green baize is bought for a curtain, and Sir Thomas's billiard room is transformed by a few carpenters into a theatre. Even Fanny's small, cold room is reluctantly turned into a place for theatricals when Edmund and Mary ask for her assistance with their lines. Here Austen conveys the intermixing of tragicomedy. The tragicomic "Lover's Vows" turns into a comedic mess as actors and actresses create mischief and deceive each other. The play creates a space for intertextuality, especially for the two couples who were together in the Sotherton episode: Henry and Maria, and Edmund and Mary. Maria plays the fallen woman, Agatha, while Henry plays the fallen women's beloved son, Frederick, who has been gone for several years. In Act 1 Scene 1 Agatha and Frederick have five stage directions that involve physical touch. While the stage directions are meant to invoke intimacy between a mother and son, it is implied that Maria and Henry are engaging in romantic intimacy. These actions spark jealousy in Julia and make Mr. Rushworth, Maria's soon-to-be fiancé, look even more foolish as he is unaware of their attraction because he is distracted by his own role, his "two and forty speeches" and the fancy apparel he must wear in his role (130). Mrs. Norris' encouragement adds to Austen's drama with her "malignant" foolery and "great appearance of energy, purpose and activity," all of which lead to nefarious situations (Lauber 519). By putting together a play, the young people bring the estate to life but also invite chaos in.

The choice of play is essential. In fact, when choosing a play, the group agrees that it must be "at once both tragedy and comedy" in order to satisfy everyone's wishes (122). Adapted by English playwright Elizabeth Inchbald, "Lover's Vows" is originally a German play, "Das Kind der Liebe" (The Love Child), by August von Kotzebue. In "'Comedy in its Worst Form'?

Seduced and Seductive Heroines in 'A Simple Story,' 'Lover's Vows,' and 'Mansfield Park,'" Carlotta Farese investigates how Inchbald's work is integrated in Austen's writing. Farese states that the play was performed multiple times in Bath while Austen lived there, making it likely that she saw it performed live:

> Today, it is widely accepted that Austen was not only a frequent theatre-goer, but also that herself and most of her family were devoted readers of classic as well as contemporary plays and they often amused themselves by organizing private theatricals with the same enthusiasm shown by the young improvised actors of *Mansfield Park*. (Farese 46-47)

The comedy follows two women: Agatha and Amelia. Both women characters in the play achieve what they need or want through marriage. Agatha's marriage to Baron Wildenhaim redeems her scarred reputation as a fallen woman, and she is given a place of position and financial stability. Amelia brazenly initiates her marriage to the priest, Anhalt, the man she loves and someone who is more mature and respected than her richer suitor, Count Cassel. Ironically, the two women who play Agatha and Amelia do not get married in the novel. Agatha marries the baron and is redeemed from her "fallen woman" status. Maria, who plays Agatha, loses her position and financial stability when her reputation is scarred by adultery. Likewise, in the play Amelia marries the priest, Anhalt. However, Mary Crawford, who plays Amelia, does not marry her suitor/rector, Edmund. In contrast, Fanny and Julia, who do not have roles in the play, do marry at the end of the novel. Fanny refuses to play her part for moral reasons and out of fear of acting, and eventually marries Edmund. Julia refuses to play because she is considered not "tragic" enough for the role of Agatha. She eventually marries Mr. Yates, a friend of her brother Tom Bertram, and also the man who brings his love for theater and "Lover's Vows" to

Mansfield Park (Austen 125). Thus, the novel calls attention to the fact that in real life women like Agatha and Amelia do not find happy endings. Maria and Mary only experience comedy when they are acting; in reality their experiences are tragic.

When Sir Thomas returns abruptly, the play is put to a stop, which is disappointing to the young people at Mansfield Park and the readers, because the young people lead mundane lives and have nothing else to do with their time. Sir Thomas' unexpected arrival occurs dramatically at the end of Volume 1, providing flair and trepidation as if his entrance were staged for a play. When he finds out about "Lover's Vows," he immediately halts its continuation - for the play itself has invaded the estate's space. Sir Thomas completes his destruction to "wipe away every outward memento" of the play by burning all the copies of "Lover's Vows" in the house (177). Later in Volume 3, Sir Thomas will complete another purge when he casts Mary, Henry, Mrs. Norris, and Maria, out of Mansfield Park for good.

The readers largely experience tragedy in *Mansfield Park* when Fanny is sent back to her hometown, Portsmouth. Fanny is returned to her family when she rejects Henry's offer of marriage. Sir Thomas is angry at her refusal to marry Henry, so he sends her back to her parents in hopes that she will change her mind. In contrast to Mansfield Park and Sotherton, Austen portrays the urban settlement as a place of destitution and filth. According to Ruth Bernard Yeazell, Portsmouth is a place that has an intense "consciousness of dirt," shown through dirty bodies, unclean utensils, and greasy food (133). Fanny is shocked when she first arrives at her parents' home. The entrance to the house is "narrow" and the parlour "so small that her first conviction [is] of its being only a passage room to something better," guiltily expecting that there is another larger room to be invited to (350). Not only is everything too small at the house in Portsmouth, but the space is filled with "incessant noise," "riotous games," "continual

disagreements," "temper," and "rash squabbles" (363). Fanny prefers Mansfield Park because there is more nature and open spaces compared to the crowded, polluted Portsmouth. Moreover, she "prefers landscape to people," her love of nature stemming from a belief that nature is "grounded in responsible, Christian morality" (Perkins 5). Fanny's family in Portsmouth is part of the lower class, and since Fanny has been educated among the upper class for so long, she finds herself no longer comfortable or approving of the inferior society.

Austen not only crafts Portsmouth in an inferior light, but also makes it a space in which only bad news reaches Fanny. While Fanny is in Portsmouth, events occur at Mansfield Park and Sotherton that are detrimental to the Bertram family and the Bertram fortunes. It is here in Portsmouth that Fanny learns of Tom's sickness, the Crawford-Rushworth scandal, and Julia's elopement. Austen's depiction of Portsmouth as a location of bad news, its small and cramped spaces, its dirty and polluted home, and its large volume of loud and vulgar sounds, underscores that it is hear that Fanny receives this news and shows the upheaval of the Bertram family.

While Portsmouth is outwardly grotesque and uncivilized, Mansfield Park and Sotherton are inwardly so. It is not until Fanny is in Portsmouth that Mansfield Park and Sotherton break down emotionally and physically. Maria and Julia's escapades emotionally hurt the Bertram estate, while Tom's illness physically hurts the estate since he is its heir. Claudia L. Johnson, in "Gender, Theory and Jane Austen Culture," states: "As could be expected in a novel where *acting* is so important, Mansfield may excel at the manner and gestures of graciousness and probity, but does not possess the substance of it, to borrow a distinction to which her characters so frequently recur, however pathetically Fanny herself - so suspicious of acting in general - is 'taken in'" (107). Johnson equates the Price family to the Bertram family. In the same way that Fanny's sisters fight over a knife, Maria and Julia vie for Henry's attention; in the same way that

Fanny's brothers cause loud ruckus, Tom causes trouble by putting together "Lover's Vows" and drinking excessively; in the same way that Mr. Price is rude to Fanny when she comes home after being gone for most of her adolescence, Sir Thomas is cruel to her when she refuses to marry Henry (107). For Johnson, the community at Mansfield Park and Sotherton are so good at acting with propriety that Fanny is deceived by them. I will add that the readers are also "taken in." Since we are witnesses to the Mansfield Park drama from Fanny's point of view, the corruption does not become visible until the very end.

Mansfield Park's corruption is exposed through the treatment of Fanny and Mary. Fanny and Mary are proto-foster care children. Relatives take them in, but they are not treated as one of the other children and can be sent back home - or to another home - whenever their guardians decide to do so. Fanny specifically is taken from her family because they cannot take care of her, financially and emotionally, making her a charity case. Mrs. Norris, who spearheads the relocation of Fanny, sees this occasion as a way of showing generosity and "benevolence" in action, although she has no interest in keeping the child (7). Several critics claim that Fanny's situation is an example of adoption, asserting that the adoption occurs at the end of the novel. Tess O'Toole, in "Becoming Fanny Bertram: Adoption in *Mansfield Park*" claims that Fanny's characterization as a weak woman "stem[s] from the subordination of *her* marriage plot to an adoption plot" (55). O'Toole interchangeably uses the terms "fosterage" and "adoption," stating that Fanny's adoption is complete when she marries Edmund, meaning that "it is the position she earns as daughter rather than as wife that secures her adult identity" (55). While this is a valid argument, Fanny's experience aligns more with the contemporary foster care system than with adoption. Historian Jenny Keating discusses the history before formal adoption and fostering was legalized in 1926:

> Adoption and fostering have always existed in the United Kingdom, in the sense of people taking other people's children into their homes and looking after them on a permanent or temporary basis. However, adoption, the permanent removal of a child into another family, had no legal basis in the United Kingdom until the 20th century and was done on an informal basis. The closest concept to adoption was "wardship," under which a guardian was given effective custody of a child by the Chancery Court, but this was little used and did not give the guardian parental rights. Fostering, where a child lives temporarily with another family, began to be regulated from the middle of the 19th century onwards, following a series of "baby farming" scandals. By the end of the 19th century, some poor law authorities and voluntary organizations were calling it "boarding out" and using it as an official alternative to putting neglected children in the workhouse or an orphanage.

I assert that Fanny and Mary are foster children before it was legalized. They are not wards, because their custody is not determined by the court. They are not adopted because they are not considered permanent, or equal, children in the households in which they reside. Instead, they are temporarily under the care of relatives who act as guardians. In essence, some critics may assume adoption when in reality the foster relationship is in effect, showing that Austen is encouraging her readers to think about alternative childhood experiences and its effects.[2]

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[2] The foster-child plot in Austen's *Mansfield Park* is similar to Charles Dickens *Hard Times*. Dickens' novel revolves around the Gradgrind family, who take in a child, Sissy, who has been abandoned by her father. Mr. Gradgrind, superintendent of the school, like Sir Thomas, is strict and overbearing in the way he raises his children, specifically towards Tom and Louisa, the two oldest. In the end, both Mr. Gradgrind and Sir Thomas realize that their educational or religious beliefs have ruined their children. In *Hard Times*, Tom Gradgrind breaks the law by stealing from his brother-in-law's bank and Louisa runs away from her husband (whom she was forced to marry by her father). Tom, like Tom Bertram, learns a lesson the hard way. Louisa, like Maria, never remarries. Sissy, like Fanny, is the only one who finds true happiness.

As a foster child, Fanny is inferior to her guardians and uneducated in the ways of the upper class. Fanny has two consistent traits: passivity and negativity. Fanny's inaction physically separates her from her cousins, emphasizing that she is not their equal. Yet although she is disadvantaged because she was not born a *Miss Bertram*, Fanny does not strive to accomplish anything during her stay at Mansfield Park. She can't exercise long, has no accomplishments in music or art, waits on Lady Bertram all day, prefers to read poetry rather than talk to people, and does not take part in the parties and social events of her cousins. In Sotherton she sits on a bench while the others run around her in circles. During a game of Speculation, Henry plays most of the game for her. In Portsmouth she does not exercise at all and sits in her family's home and reads letters about all the drama that is happening back in Mansfield Park and London. She says "no" to playing a part in "Lover's Vows," saying that she "really cannot act," although this statement seems true for Fanny not just in acting in a play but also in everyday actions (136). She refuses Henry's proposals, and even says no to Sir Bertram and Edmund when they confront her on the subject. Fanny remains static, unable to move forward and past her inferior and timid state.

As a static character, Fanny's choices are driven by fear. She hates being in the spotlight and is afraid of doing wrong - and so she either does nothing or says no. In one scene Sir Thomas comes to her room to discuss her refusal to marry Henry. Fanny is not brave when she stands up against Sir Thomas' confrontation, and her entire interactions with him are anxiety-plagued. "Exceedingly nervous," Fanny sits with "infinite grief" and "trembling wretchedness" and cries "bitterly" as she tries to explain vaguely why she has turned Henry down (293-295). Fanny does not want to marry Henry because she believes his character is lacking, but she cannot form the words to communicate this to her uncle and guardian. Unlike Amelia in "Lover's Vows," who

boldly tells her father why she is refusing to marry Count Cassel, Fanny is too afraid to explain to Sir Thomas why she is refusing to marry Henry. Thus, while Amelia's refusal is portrayed as bold, Fanny's refusal is portrayed as weak.

Fanny's movements, or lack thereof, are starkly different from her aunts'. While Mrs. Norris is a busy-body - constantly moving and encouraging frugality - in contrast, Lady Bertram is motionless, remaining on her sofa all day and spending her time petting her pug or writing letters. Fanny is the balance between the two - she does not move around treacherously the way Mrs. Norris does, but neither is she dormant and negligent as Lady Bertram is. Instead, Fanny plays the role of audience in the novel, an observer and speculator. As an audience member, Fanny notices the dramatic irony occurring at Mansfield Park. She is aware of Henry and Maria's interest in one another, both at Sotherton and during rehearsals of "Lover's Vows." Likewise, she is aware of Julia's jealousy, Henry's inconstancy, and Mary's moral shortcomings, which other members of the family appear to miss. In the observer/audience role, Fanny's ability to discern and judge situations and people is far superior to others in the text.

Fanny's passivity and inactivity mean that Austen develops her character through interiority. Kathryn Sutherland observes that Fanny is "the good listener and herself the model for the novel's preferred narrative voicing" (313). Kathleen Urda goes further to say that "Readers are the spectators of Fanny's mental theatre, but Austen shows the limits of Fanny as a quiet, passive spectator, even one with a highly cultivated and sensitive inner life" (296-97). In another essay, Urda argues that "[a]lthough Fanny...embrace[s] the idea that the life of the mind may provide a retreat and, ultimately, a route to happiness, Austen herself resists the tendency to interpret such interiority as an ideal state by describing it as a place of solitude, suppression and concealment" (2). Urda goes on to expound on how Fanny's mind is manipulated by Sir Thomas

when he sends her back to Portsmouth: "The familiar dynamic of an authoritarian patriarch exerting undue influence over a young woman can be seen when Fanny refuses Mr Crawford's proposal, to Sir Thomas's displeasure, but what is new is that Sir Thomas plans to usurp control not so much over Fanny's body as over her mind" (6). Urda's statement reiterates what we have witnessed earlier when examining how Edmund influenced Fanny's education. Fanny is the Bertram family's vassal to subordinate for their own ambitions.

As the Bertram family's vassal, Fanny's marriage to Edmund does not allow for a satisfactory conclusion to her story. Theirs is an incestuous marriage because they are first cousins who have grown up together in the same household. The marriage is acceptable and lawful, and we are told Fanny and Edmund are happy. However, Fanny's marriage and acceptance into the family as a daughter illustrates how one family can dominate the mind and body of an individual, inadvertently creating the "perfect" spouse and daughter, thus guaranteeing the survival of the estate.

Fanny's voice is the one we follow in *Mansfield Park*, but it is Mary Crawford's voice that is provocative. Mary is Austen's most complex character in *Mansfield Park*, and she is either loved or hated by critics for her ferocious energy and juxtaposition to Fanny. D.D. Delvin, in his 1975 *Mansfield Park* chapter in *Jane Austen and Education*, chides critics who perceive Mary as another Elizabeth Bennet; instead, he claims that Mary's "charm is her abuse of her intelligence" (86). Juliette Wells, in her 2006 essay, calls Mary "one of Austen's most ambiguous characters" because it is unclear exactly what all of her intentions are, redeeming her a little (102). Stefanie Markovits in her 2007 critical piece calls out Mary as a female version of Milton's Satan (787). In 2010, Peter W. Graham says that Mary is either an "angel in the house" or "a siren luring men through her music," but that by the Sotherton scene, she is portrayed by

Austen as more of a siren (874). Consequently, Mary's reputation in literary criticism, from past and present, is scarred at best.

In addition to being critiqued by readers, Mary is critiqued by other characters more than anyone else in the novel. Edmund and Fanny discuss Mary's behavior on multiple occasions, debating whether her actions and words are morally upright. The word "cure" is repeatedly used in reference to Mary. Mrs. Grant tells Mary, "You are as a bad as your brother, Mary; but we will cure you both. Mansfield Park shall cure you both - and without any taking in. Stay with us and we will cure you" (45). Later, Mary tells Fanny, "Selfishness must always be forgiven you know, because there is no hope of a cure" (65). Even the narrator critiques Mary. When Fanny returns to Mansfield Park and marries Edmund, she becomes the "cure" for Edmund's "unconquerable passions" for Mary, as Austen notes: "I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people" (436). Mary's self-reflection that she cannot be cured, let alone cure others, suggests that she is metaphorically the disease.

Mary's ambiguity and negative depiction stem from her history. Mary Evans, in "Henry Crawford and the 'Sphere of Love' in *Mansfield Park*," highlights how Mary and Henry Crawford lead a parallel story to Fanny. Evans mostly focuses on the similarities between Henry and Fanny in her analysis, stating that both have 1) an absent, living biological father, 2) issues with their surrogate father/uncle, and 3) a close relationship with a sibling (46). These three points however, are also true for Mary. Evans goes on to defend the Crawford siblings:

> ...what is more exceptional about Crawfords' family history is the reason for the absence of their father, and the clearly explicit adulterous relationship between Admiral Crawford

> and his mistress. We are never told why Henry and Mary Crawford's father vanished from their lives so soon after his wife's death. Widowers - particularly those as relatively affluent as the Crawfords' father must have been - did remain with their children, and gave their everyday care to women such as the excellent Mrs. Weston in *Emma*. These surrogate mothers, whether employees or close family friends (such as Lady Elliot in *Persuasion*) allowed widowed fathers to continue to live with their children. We are given no information as to why the Crawfords' father should have so apparently precipitously handed over the care of his children to his brother... (38)

With no mother and an absent father, Mary's experience is that of a foster child. She is traded off between families, first with her aunt and uncle, then with her elder half-sister and brother-in-law, then between friends in London, and then back to her half-sister after her brother-in-law passes away. This movement between homes was normal for a single woman. In fact, according to Amanda Vickery, "[O]ver a lifetime a single woman might easily experience a variety of residential arrangements, from daughter of the house, to commercial lodger, unpaid housekeeper in a family house, to family boarder, to co-tenant with other women, related and unrelated. Home was hardly a static entity for them" (5). Mary's movement between families emphasizes that she is devoid of a true home.

As a foster child, Mary easily finds herself at home in Mansfield Park. The Bertrams quickly become her family in her mind. From the beginning, with the guidance of Mrs. Grant, she has her eyes set on Tom, because she feels "an early presentiment that she *should* like the eldest best. She knew it was her way" (45). Her desire to marry the eldest is partially for economic reasons. As a woman who has no permanent place to call home, she desires financial stability and prestige, as she contemplates Tom's assets:

> … he was the sort of young man to be generally liked, his agreeableness was of the kind to be oftener found agreeable than some endowments of a higher stamp, for he had easy manners, excellent spirits, a large acquaintance, and a great deal to say; and the reversion of Mansfield Park, and a baronetcy, did no harm to all of this. Miss Crawford soon felt, that he and his situation might do. She looked about her with due consideration, and found almost every thing in his favour, a park, a real park five miles around, a spacious modern-built house, so well placed and well screened as to deserve to be in any collection of engravings of gentlemen's seats in the kingdom, and wanting only to be completely new furnished... (45-46)

As seen here, Tom's living situation is almost as important to Mary as his personality and family. Likewise, when she falls for Edmund, the second son, she encourages him to find a more prestigious occupation, such as the law or the navy. However, when Edmund does not renounce his desire to become ordained, she decides that he is still worthy of her affections, showing that his occupation is not everything to her. As Graham points out in "Falling for the Crawfords: Character, Contingency, and Narrative," "Unlike Edmund, who discovers he's loved a self-created fantasy, Mary has loved him as he is, in spite of the true religious vocation she can't adequately understand and the principles that her 'corrupted' mind can't fathom" (886). Thus, Mary is drawn to Edmund (and Mansfield Park) because she loves him, not just for his propriety and refinement.

Mary's desires are multifaceted: she wants prestige, needs financial security, respects Edmund's intelligence and strong convictions, but she also cares about community. She is drawn to the Bertrams because they appear to be a more stable family than her own dysfunctional one. None of the families that Mary has stayed with look like the Bertrams, who present the image of

a harmonious household: a father, mother, and children who all peaceably live together under one roof. Her uncle has a mistress, the Grants have no children, and she does not admire her friends' relationships with their husbands. When Mary enters the East Room for the last time, she suddenly becomes sentimental, fondly remembering her rehearsal with Fanny and Edmund. Unlike Edmund, who remembers the play as "that period of general folly" (324), M ary recalls "that acting week" as a time where she "never knew such exquisite happiness, in any other" (332). M ary's burst of emotion illuminates her joy in being a part of something, her love for Edmund, and her delight in acting (of which she and Henry are both excellent at, according to Austen). Y et it also shows her happiness in being part of a family, as Mary tells Fanny: "I hate to leave you. I shall see no one half so amiable where I am going. Who says we shall not be sisters? I know we shall. I feel that we are born to be connected; and those tears convince me that you feel it too, dear Fanny" (333). Mary even has kind words for Sir Thomas when she departs, saying that "he is just what the head of such a family should be" (332). Thus, Mary places Mansfield Park and its inhabitants as superior to all other communities in which she has resided.

Mary's words, however, are contradictory to her actions and show that she is also deceived by Mansfield Park's outward appearance. She only befriends Fanny after Maria and Julia have left Mansfield Park, when she is in need of a companion besides the Grants. And as she admires Sir Thomas in his role as head of the family, it is clear in the text that he is not worthy of such admiration. He leaves his family to visit his Antigua estate for months at a time, does not try hard enough to persuade Maria not to marry Mr. Rushworth, even though he knows she does not love him, tyrannically ends the play production, and punishes Fanny for refusing to marry Henry. Sir Thomas' biggest mistake is his handling of Mrs. Norris. As Johnson states in her essay;

> Far from taking her [Mrs. Norris] for a nasty fool, Sir Thomas licenses her interventions; far from spotting her preternatural viciousness to Fanny, Edmund believes that it would be wonderful for Fanny to go and live with her at the parsonage; and far from finding something wrong with her command that Fanny always regard herself as the lowest and the last, Fanny entirely concurs. Although Austen's irony is systemic, we are not encouraged to laugh at such blindness. (104)

Sir Thomas allows Mrs. Norris to influence the estate with her evil machinations, practically letting her run Mansfield Park while he is in Antigua. It is Mrs. Norris who encourages the arrival of Fanny to Mansfield Park and then neglects and abuses her. It is also Mrs. Norris who encourages Maria to marry Mr. Rushworth, encourages estate improvements, and encourages the production of "Lover's Vows." Edmund fails Fanny as well, by endorsing the idea that Mrs. Norris and Fanny live together in the parsonage, despite their aunt's maliciousness. Mansfield Park may look more stable than other homes in which Mary has lived, but the estate and its family are also broken and abusive.

Mary and Fanny's complicated relationship throughout the text is a testament to both their desire for authentic family and friendship, and their inability to completely obtain it. When they first meet each other, Mary is confused by Fanny's position in the Bertram household, asking prying questions about whether she is "out" or not, and does not care if she takes Fanny's exercise time on her horse away from her. Fanny detests Mary for a long time, partly from jealousy because she wants Edmund for herself, partly because she is astonished by Mary's bold character, and partly because she is prudish and sees herself as morally better than Mary. However, as time goes on, Mary shows Fanny kindness in three specific ways. First, when Fanny refuses to play a role in "Lover's Vows," Mary comforts her when everyone else is angry at her

refusal. Second, Mary invites Fanny over to hear her play the harp, which ignites a budding friendship as they begin to spend some time together walking outdoors. Third, Mary's encouragement of Fanny's marriage to Henry can be seen as kindness because she genuinely believes that they will do well together. In the last chapter, the narrator states that Henry and Fanny could have happily married if he had chosen not to run away with Maria (434). Mary's growing kindness towards Fanny allows Fanny to start "meditating on the different sorts of friendship in the world," therefore solidifying a bond between the two outsiders who have now been influenced by Mansfield Park's charms (333).

Fanny and Mary's friendship dwindles when they both leave Mansfield Park. They write letters to each other for a while when they are first apart, and all seems well. Henry's agreeable impression of Fanny when he visits her also helps make the friendship last a little longer. However, the distance between Portsmouth and London, and the circumstances that arise when Mansfield Park falls apart, prevent them from continuing their relationship. Mary fails to write back for the longest time, making Fanny believe "that she had some reason to think lightly of the friendship which had been so dwelt on" (402). Fanny, once again, feels neglected and forgotten, the "oppressive heat" greasiness, and dirtiness of Portsmouth only making "her still more melancholy" (408). When Mary finally writes after Tom falls ill, she is keen on Edmund becoming Sir Bertram, her "cold-hearted ambition" disgusting Fanny (404). When Fanny returns to Mansfield Park and learns the full story of all that has happened from Edmund, Fanny's adverse response to Mary's actions is almost identical to Edmund's, exhibiting how much influence Edmund's beliefs and ideas have been taught and ingrained in her.

Austen's work demonstrates that there are various forms of tragedy and comedy. In "A Subdued Gaity: The Comedy of *Mansfield Park*," Pam Perkins argues that Austen juxtaposes

two forms of comedy through the characters of Mary and Fanny. While Mary represents the early-eighteenth-century "laughing" comedy, Fanny represents the "rather solemn but uplifting 'sentimental' comedy" of the day (3). Mary's wit, humor, and authoritative voice epitomize Austen's popular heroines, such as Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet. Fanny, however, is tender and timid, making her comedic side more based on her marriage and ability to create unity, balance, and stability at the end of the novel, rather than her ability to make others laugh out loud (437).

The word "happiness" appears nineteen times in the last chapter of *Mansfield Park*. The question is: Is this really a happy ending? In "Jane Austen and the Happy Fall," Markovits contemplates that "there is something slightly sinister about a happiness so based upon the misery of others, on the 'mutual punishment' endured by Maria and Mrs. Norris, on Mary's spinsterhood, Tom's illness, Henry's stunted promise of moral growth, and Dr. Grant's 'apoplexy and death'" (787-88). In addition, Fanny and Mary's tragic upbringing in foster-like care emphasizes the plight of children in early 19th Century England. Austen effectively uses setting as a function to help form her tragic and comedic plot line of the characters. Setting as a device and artistic symbol becomes an indicator for the audience to know if they are in the comedic world or the tragic world, conveying the story's complex relationships and critical tone. Austen's artistic mastery is that she creates an unlikeable heroine, but still attracts and retains her audience with the complex relationships and dark themes of the novel through a tragicomic sphere. In the end, Austen is critiquing the comic places, Mansfield Park and Sotherton, and the tragic place, Portsmouth. According to Paul Pickrel, Austen's conclusion for Mansfield Park is a "failure of artistry…so badly done that it reveals Austen to be 'tired and in uncertain control'" (in Perkins 22). Pickrel fails to see that Austen's seemingly hastily wrapped up and unsatisfactory ending is

intentional and artistically brilliant – demonstrating the tragedy of comedy and an audience's unrealistic expectations for a truly happily ever after.

Chapter 2

"And not only she, but many others, had seen this headless lady, who sat by the roadside wringing her hands as in deep grief." (Gaskell 119)

A ghost haunts the rural community of Cranford. A "lady all in white, and without her head" roams Cranford at night (Gaskell 119). Witnessed by many in the community, she is known for her melancholy temperament. The lady phantom in *Cranford* is a symbol of a dying generation in England. Published in 1853, *Cranford* is autobiographical in nature - loosely based on Gaskell's experiences growing up in Knutsford, England. Gaskell wrote a nonfiction version first, before she wrote the fictional *Cranford*. The autobiographical collection of her time at Knutsford, "The Last Generation in England," was published in 1849, and some of the nonfiction accounts appear in the fictional *Cranford* (Gaskell 189) . Gaskell's title for her non-fiction version of the narrative is explicit and correlates to the novel. The women characters in Gaskell's work are nearing the end of their life, with no children to carry on after them. The Cranford women are the last generation of their family tree. *Cranford's* "headless lady" represents a dying and "last" generation. With no children to live after them, the community is threatened to become a ghost town by the extinction of family lines.

Cranford is narrated by Mary Smith, a young woman who visits Cranford often. While writing Cranford's history, Mary begins as an outsider, and with time, becomes a member of the community. Mary is largely unseen in the novel and serves the role of observer and listener to the Cranford society; her narration is a collection of vignettes rather than a chronological narrative. The text is written in an epistolary style, only lacking the formal addresses and greetings that are in the letter genre. Each chapter focuses on an event that happens in Cranford,

from visiting Miss Matty's old lover, Mr. Holbrook, to reading Miss Matty's letters from long ago.

Mary spends most of her visits in Cranford with the Jenkyns sisters, Miss Deborah Jenkyns and Miss Matty, two elderly unmarried women in the town. Over time, Mary becomes friends with the other women in the community as well. Deborah Jenkyns passes away early in the narrative, and Miss Matty's storyline becomes the centerpiece of the novel. Deborah's passing allows the timid Miss Matty to face the ghosts of her past: an old lover that she was discouraged from uniting with in matrimony; her dead parents, who were spiritual leaders of the community; and her poor brother Peter, who went to India in his adolescent years and who everyone believes is now dead. Miss Matty has resigned herself to a lifelong spinsterhood. While she has one opportunity in her old age for companionship with her old lover, Mr. Holbrook, she chooses not to restore the relationship to its former level of devotion and commitment out of respect for her deceased family's wishes.

Even when Miss Matty has full autonomy in her old age, she continues to adhere to her parents' and older sister's rules and propriety. A poignant example is Deborah's orange eating ritual. Whenever Miss Matty and Mary eat oranges, Miss Matty insists they can only eat them alone in their own rooms. When Deborah was alive, she believed that eating oranges with others was improper due to the sloppiness of eating a juicy fruit, which is why the orange-eating ritual is implemented. Miss Matty continues the ritual even after Deborah has passed away, out of fearful respect toward her sister. The ritual is humorous at first, but the image of the women alone in their rooms eating fruit is a lonely picture. Miss Matty is dependent on her family even after they have passed away. It is as if Miss Matty's deceased family members are ghosts in her home, taking away her freedom and ability to make her own decisions.

At the same time that Miss Matty faces her ghosts, the community experiences panic when rumors spread that robbers are in the neighborhood stealing from homes and invading their private spaces. Ghosts become real as shadows appear in the night, footprints are found in the garden, and noises are heard in the dark. The robbers turn out not to be robbers at all, but a new family in town, the Browns. Mary spends time with Mrs. Brown, who tells Mary about a man named Aga Jenkyns, who saved their daughter's life while they were in India. Curious about the last name, Mary suspects that Aga Jenkyns might be Miss Matty's lost brother, Peter. Taking a risk, Mary writes to the mysterious Aga Jenkyns, in hopes that he will come back to Cranford and his sister. While all of these events are occurring in Cranford, Miss Matty experiences financial trouble when her bank declares bankruptcy. With little education or knowledge of how to run a business, Miss Matty is forced to open a small shop and sell some of her family's possessions. Her friends come around to support her, but it is still not enough for Miss Matty to live on. When all seems lost, Peter returns to Cranford. Peter's return means that Miss Matty will now be cared for in her old age.

Gaskell's life experiences are reflected in *Cranford*, especially through Mary Smith and Miss Matty. Coral Lansbury gives a brief synopsis of Gaskell's life in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis*. Gaskell was thirteen months old when her mother died (15). After her mother's death, she lived with her aunt, Mrs. Hannah Lumb, in Knutsford (15). Although Gaskell's father remarried later, she continued to live with her aunt and her mother's relatives in-between school sessions and before she married (15). Gaskell's personal history parallels Mary Smith's story in *Cranford*. Both Gaskell and Mary Smith lose their mothers at a young age and have a father that is largely absent from their life. Like Mary Smith, Gaskell did not get along well with her step-mother, but saw her aunt as the mother figure in her life (15). Another tragedy

that Gaskell endured in her lifetime occurred when her brother John Stevenson disappeared at sea while on a voyage to India in 1824 (16). Thus, Gaskell's loss is similar to Miss Matty's loss, when her brother Peter Jenkyns disappears while fighting in a war in India. While Gaskell's *Cranford* grows out of her own personal hardships, some of the humorous scenes in the narrative are real accounts as well. The scene where Mrs. Forrester tells a story at a dinner party about her cat swallowing and regurgitating her lace actually happened in Knutsford while Gaskell was living there (Gaskell 191). Gaskell's narrative is like a piece of creative nonfiction, incorporating both comedic and tragic elements from her own experience.

The comic aspect of the novel comes from the start. In the opening sentence to *Cranford*, Mary introduces the place by stating that the town "is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses, above a certain rent, are women" (1). In classic Greek mythology, the Amazons were a tribe of women warriors, generally depicted as aggressive and fierce with myriad weaponry such as shields, bows and arrows, and axes. The women of Cranford, however, do not have the same physical strength and zeal that the Amazon women embody. In fact, they are older, unmarried ladies who rent their homes; the houses do not belong to them. Most of the women in Cranford are actually quite poor, or become poor in the novel, but still try to maintain an appearance of an upper class standing. In the opening chapter, Mary Smith reflects on all the activities the Cranford ladies are "quite sufficient" in, including maintaining well-kept gardens, frightening boys and geese away from their gardens, and maintaining order and dictatorship over everyone and everything in the town – including themselves (1). While the latter part of the list contains some Amazonian characteristics, the Cranford women are largely absorbed in the domestic rather than the militaristic way of life commonly associated with the mythical Amazon community.

The humorous image of the women frightening boys and geese away from the well-kept garden is an accurate representation of what the Cranford matrons also do when men move into the town. Men in Cranford are depicted as outrageous, comedic (in contrast to heroic), and at times, dangerous. Captain Brown, a railroad worker, is scolded and challenged for preferring Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* (a story about an all-male club); Mr. Holbrook, a farmer, is labelled as too poor and improper to marry Miss Matty; and Signor Brunoni, a traveling magician and outsider, is suspected of causing all the crime in town. The concept of "husband" is abhorred by some of the women in the community as well. Men who marry Cranford women are disregarded:

> Soon after Miss Mary Hoggins married Mr Fitz-Adam, she disappeared from the neighborhood for many years. She did not move in a sphere in Cranford society sufficiently high to make any of us care to know what Mr Fitz-Adam was. He died and was gathered to his fathers, without our ever having thought about him at all. And then Mrs Fitz-Adam reappeared in Cranford 'as bold as a lion,'...a well-to-do widow, dressed in rustling black silk, so soon after her husband's death...that 'bombazine would have shown a deeper sense of her loss'. (77-78)

Not only are the Cranford women indifferent to Mr Fitz-Adam, but even Mrs Fitz-Adam is more absorbed in her attire than she is in her husband's death. In another example, when Lady Glenmire announces her engagement to someone below her class standing, the women express outraged emotions, including "madness" (137), "surprise" (139), and a feeling of "upset" (140). Their reaction to the news shows their discomfort with the marriage; the women of Cranford firmly find Lady Glenmire's engagement appalling. Miss Pole even goes so far to state that she is thankful for escaping marriage and encourages others to be grateful, too (126). Men are not

husbands but transient members in the community; their sole purpose is to provide entertainment and gossip for the matrons of Cranford.

Captain Brown is one example of a man who provides entertainment and contrast to the Cranford matrons. Captain Brown is associated with everything that Cranford is not: he is a man and a railroad associate, he is outspoken about his poverty, he is a widower with two daughters, and he has moments of impropriety. Examples of Captain Brown's "impropriety" include openly speaking about his poverty, helping a poor woman carry food down a road, and reading Charles Dickens at a social gathering, highlighting Cranford's humorous and ridiculous social standards. The humor continues when Captain Brown and Deborah bicker about which writer is better, Dickens, or "Mr. Boz" (according to Captain Brown), or Dr. Johnson (according to Deborah). (This is an inside joke, for Gaskell here is mocking her publisher, Dickens, by including him in Captain Brown and Deborah's literary argument.) Unfortunately, Captain Brown is reading Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* when he notices a little girl running across the train tracks, which then leads to his death when he drops the book to rescue her. Deborah sees the book as the captain's undoing, calling him a "poor, dear, infatuated man" when she hears the news (24). Long after Captain Brown's death, the Jenkyns sisters maintain a relationship with his granddaughter, Flora. Miss Matty, who is a proponent of peace, leaves a copy of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* out for Flora to read while Deborah is napping. Thus, Gaskell effectively guides the reader through the community's past and present, using humor to provide closure where tragedy began.

Darker aspects enter Cranford in chapter two. The train, an unwelcome addition to Cranford, brings Captain Brown briefly into the community, and then the train eventually causes his death. Captain Brown's death in chapter two is unexpected by the reader because his introduction to Cranford society in chapter one is so prominent that he promises to be one of the

main characters in the novel. Yet his death should not be surprising. Captain Brown's death by train stresses the railroad's antagonistic nature. Trains were a symbol of change: fast, efficient, and loud. Like Captain Brown, the trains are everything that the rural town of Cranford is not. Captain Brown's death by the railroad symbolizes the first Industrial Revolution's destructive nature as it took over England's countryside. The 'old' England was disappearing, as the landscape transformed into a place of machinery, factories, and trains.

Captain Brown's death also emphasizes what the narrator has already told us - that men in Cranford do not last long. There are references to death leading up to the actual deaths in chapters one and two. In chapter one, Mary states:

> If a married couple come to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears; he is either fairly frightened to *death* by being the only man in the Cranford evening parties, or he is accounted for by being with his regiment, his ship, or closely engaged in business all the week in the great neighbouring commercial town of Drumble, distant only twenty miles on a railroad. (5, emphasis mine)

And another: "Death was as true and as common as poverty; yet people never spoke about that, loud out in the streets" (8). These references foreshadow the deaths of Captain Brown and his oldest daughter, Miss Brown, and they reinforce the idea that these deaths must happen in the novel in order for the story to stay true to itself. Men and trains do not belong in Cranford.

Cranford begins and ends with the entrance of a man into the community. Captain Brown's introduction to the community is brief, ending with his death, emphasizing that the changing world is destructive. The captain should be part of a comedy. He is the comedic opposite to Deborah Jenkyns, and the reader expects their banter to continue throughout the

novel. Overtime, would he wear down some of the women so that they would accept him? This is unknown, for he is a man who does not fit into this world and he ends so quickly the reader does not linger on him. In contrast, Peter's introduction to the community at the end of the novel has the opposite effect. Peter's entrance to Cranford is welcome[3] because he displays feminine qualities and charm, making him a suitable addition to Cranford high society.

Although Captain Brown's death is shocking, his death is not where the tragedy of the novel lies. That comes through Peter's playacting. One night Miss Matty shares Peter's story with Mary Smith. As a young man, Peter enjoys playacting. On two occasions Peter dresses-up as female characters. The first time Peter pretends to be an older woman who admires the rector's sermons. The second time he dresses up as his sister Miss Deborah Jenkins, "cuddling his pillow, just like a baby" (63). These two instances show Peter's ability to adapt easily to Cranford's dominant female culture. Not only is Peter willing to dress like a woman, but he also talks and acts like them as well, even going so far as talking "nonsense" to the baby and showing it off to people through the garden rails as if he were a proud mother (63). Peter's playacting is imaginative and comedic, and his portrayal of women characters reinforces his belonging in Cranford. Yet what is a simple, juvenile act has a terrible payoff.

While Peter belongs in Cranford, he departs the town when he is punished for his playacting. Peter's punishment haunts Miss Matty all her life. Peter's dressing up and playacting is something that should be humorous. However, what is meant to be humorous turns into a tragic event when his father punishes him for his playacting. Curiously enough, the second scene in which Peter dresses up as his sister is similar to the image in chapter one in which the women

[3] Peter is also welcome because, like Signor Brunoni, he has lived in exotic places and can entertain the community with his remarkable stories.

are maintaining their gardens and frightening boys and geese away because they are naughtily gazing at the produce through the rails (1). The women maintaining their gardens is a humorous scene, but really is an echo of an event in the past that is not funny at all. The women frightening boys and geese away harkens back to the rector frightening Peter and the townspeople away from the garden when he tears off Peter's clothes and flogs him (63-64). Ironically, the father takes the position of the women of Cranford by being the one to maintain the garden and guard it from curious eyes and a mischievous boy. The difference, however, between the father's "garden maintenance" and the Cranford women's garden maintenance is that the father takes to the stage in a tragic turn by frightening everyone away through his public humiliation of his son: undressing him and physically bruising him.

Peter's personality and story arc symbolize the combination of comedy and tragedy. The women of Cranford find Peter relatable because of his feminine qualities, his love to entertain, and his bachelorhood. While Peter's return brings the story to a peaceful, comedic end, the reason he left in the first place is tragic. Peter's ability to entertain, dress, and playact as female characters - all of which the Cranford women love - causes his father to humiliate and hurt him publicly. What starts as a comedic play act of a man representing a woman with an illegitimate child becomes tragic when the father tears Peter's clothes, beats him, and figuratively throws the child (the pillow) to the audience (63).

Gaskell demonstrates that parental abuse is not tolerable. According to Lansbury, "There is no record of Elizabeth Gaskell having been beaten as a child or at school. Reason and the birch could not exist together in the schoolroom according to Unitarian practice.[4] If an adult was a

[4] Elizabeth Gaskell maintained strong Unitarian beliefs throughout her life. Elizabeth's father and husband were both Unitarian ministers.

rational being, then a child was only slightly less so, and no one had ever beaten understanding into a human being" (13). The rector's destruction of the playacting and of Peter's identity compels Peter to run away to work on the ships, never to return until after his mother's death. In this story, parental abuse is the worst that can be done to a child. In essence, Peter's father is sending his son into exile, and his exile has reaped tragic results by breaking the family apart. Peter's playacting, while intended as harmless, brings tragedy into the ordinary world of *Cranford*.

Despite Peter's misbehavior in his father's eyes, he is the exception to Cranford society's disapproval of men. Eileen Gillooly in "Humor as Daughterly Defense in *Cranford*" claims that Peter and Mary are depicted as children in the novel, and that "both children challenge the authority of their fathers and 'the old ladies in Cranford' by mocking them: Peter through gross physical parody; Mary, through cautious verbal humor" (897). Peter's humor comes through his acting. Peter's return to Cranford provides conclusion to the novel, creating equilibrium and "peace," as the last chapter indicates, by bringing everyone back together in harmony through his humorous stories. The Cranford women believe that Peter is "thinking of Mrs. Jamieson for a wife" (190), but Mary sees through it and realizes that he is actually up to his "old tricks" again as he tells Mrs. Jamieson tall tales of high mountains, "each exceeding the former in absurdity" (191). His final outrageous story is shooting cherubim, which makes the high-and-mighty Mrs. Jamieson "uncomfortable amazed" at the sacrilegious act (192). Peter's stories highlight the imagination and humor that thrives in Cranford.

As Peter's humor comes through his acting, Mary's humor comes through her writing. Mary shares her experiences at Cranford with restraint and wit, portraying the idiosyncrasies of the Cranford women without completely wounding their pride in her chronicles of the society. In

fact, Mary's style and pace in the narration "accommodate…easily to a female world of talk and letters, the telling and re-telling of news and reminiscences and stories" (Fowler 722). In contrast to Mary's conversational style, she calls her father's letters "just a man's letter; very dull," showing her impatience with men (191). Mary's dislike of her father's letter writing shows that the Cranford women are influencing her perception of men. By writing about the humorous perceptions and everyday events that happen in Cranford, Mary keeps the narrative from becoming too bleak. Mary is a younger generation of the Cranford women, someone who can array the town's tragedies, make her own choices, and live a full and abundant life.

Mary Smith is Cranford's storyteller, and in essence, a stand-in for the nonfiction narrator, Gaskell. Like Gaskell, Mary Smith's mother is dead. While she still has a living father, he is always on business, and it is implied that her step-mother does not appreciate her presence. She goes back and forth between Drumble and Cranford frequently; neither place seems completely "home." When she is in Cranford, she is invited to stay with different people during her time there, including the Jenkyns sisters and Miss Pole. Mary is too old to be considered a proto-foster child in the same way that Fanny Price and Mary Crawford are in *Mansfield Park*. However, the women in Cranford at times treat Mary like a child, even their own daughter, because she is so much younger than the other women of her station in Cranford.

Mary Smith is a static character, but it is her narration that allows Cranford to be known by those outside of its society. She has a generic name[5] and we don't even know her name until halfway through the novel. As the narrator, Mary shares with the reader her experiences and thoughts about the community. It is not until Miss Matty loses all of her money to the Town and

[5] A common criticism of Gaskell is that she is quite unimaginative in naming characters.

County Bank that Mary takes action, by writing a letter to Aga Jenkins and helping Miss Matty set up a shop in her home. In the same way, Mary's action of writing about Cranford is unconventional. Whereas many Victorian novels concern children, family, and marriage, *Cranford* does none of those things. Instead of this being a story about Mary and her coming of age or prospective marriage, Gaskell chooses to write about an older generation that is dying in a number of ways. The Cranford women (and men) are literally dying of old age, their family lineages (like the Jenkyns) are dying because there are no children to continue the family name, and their status as members of the gentry is dying as social classes morph and change with the new industrial era.

To mask the death happening all around them, the Cranford women imagine tragedies from minor incidents. When Signor Brunoni displays his magic show at the Assembly Room, the women are "astonished," "mystified," "perplexed," "awe-stricken," and "uncomfortable" at the strangeness of the act (105-106). Around the same time the magic show occurs, the women imagine that they are being robbed, and their reactions to this possibility are similar to the magic show, as they grow "afraid" (107), become "excited" (109), "anxious" (111), and are full of "awe-stricken wonder" (111). The women are in fact "jealous" when they hear that Mrs. Jamieson's house has been attacked, while their own homes have not been, showing their desire for excitement and danger (112). The supposed robberies also suggest that men, in this case the robbers, are dangerous. Miss Matty's reaction to the robberies is poignant. Every night, Miss Matty rolls a child's play ball under the bed to make sure no one is underneath before she goes to sleep (117). The action is both humorous and somber. No Amazon would use a toy to detect intruders, nor will a toy protect Miss Matty if someone is actually under the bed. The nightly

routine is a strong dose of reality - our heroine/Amazon is re-conceptualized as a solitary elderly woman in a domestic space with irrational fears.

Cranford turns the tables by telling the stories of older, single women rather than younger, marriageable women. Michal Peled Ginsburg, in "Narratives of Survival," argues that Gaskell severs the tie between housekeeping and matrimony:

> The narrative thus can represent domestic labor as an autonomous activity rather than as the supposedly natural accompaniment of the (equally natural) reproduction of the family. By undoing the link between what are normally considered the two sides of the same coin, Gaskell can represent housekeeping as labor and the forging of affective ties as a social practice. (412)

Domestic duties are not linked to husbands and children in Cranford. Thus, Mary Smith and Miss Matty can be hostesses, own a home and business, make money, and live decently, without the influence or need of men and children. For Gaskell's original audience, housework and family were targeted towards women. Isabella Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861) sold 60,000 copies in the first year it was published alone. Here is an excerpt from Beeton's book on "Advise for the Mistress of the Household":

> As with the Commander of an Army, or the leader of any enterprise, so it is with the mistress of a house. Her spirit will be seen through the whole establishment; and just in proportion as she performs her duties intelligently and thoroughly, so will her domestics follow in her path. Of all those acquirements, which more particularly belong to the feminine character, there are none which take a higher rank, in our estimation, than such as enter into a knowledge of household duties; for on these are perpetually dependent the

> happiness, comfort, and well-being of a family. In this opinion we are borne out by the author of 'The Vicar of Wakefield', who says: 'The modest virgin, the prudent wife, and the careful matron, are much more serviceable in life than petticoated philosophers, blustering heroines, or virago queens. She who makes her husband and her children happy, who reclaims the one from vice and trains up the other in virtue, is a much greater character than ladies described in romances, whose whole occupation is to murder mankind with shafts from their quiver, or their eyes.' (1)

Note the militaristic references in the text. The mistress is compared to the Commander of an Army. The quote from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* claims that an ordinary woman is more useful than a heroine (an Amazon, for example), who fights in battles. Women in literature who perform heroic feats are described as murderers of mankind. Clearly, household duties are highly valued and seen as equal to military accomplishments, but service done outside of the home is disgraceful.

Ginsberg's analysis of *Cranford* and Beeton's advice to 19th century British household mistresses explain why a large portion of Mary Smith's narration in *Cranford* is spent concentrating on housework and etiquette. The women fixate on specific details as a sign of elegance and propriety (Meir 5). Because they are poor, they cannot afford to show their status in home decor, food, and clothing; instead, they must show it in their behavior and formalities. As Mary Smith becomes part of the community, she makes a written account of their rules of engagement showing how the women of Cranford have come to dominate the town's society through the domestic world. There are "rules and regulations for visiting and calls" (6). Calls can only be placed between twelve and three, and only for fifteen minutes (6). Once a house call is made, it must be returned within three days (6). The irony is that the women know that these

formalities are all only for show. John Kucich characterizes this playacting in his article "Reverse Slumming: Cross-Class Performativity and Organic Order in Dickens and Gaskell":

> "Reverse slumming" designates a mode of middle- or lower-middle-class performance that mimics upper-class behaviors so as to reaffirm social hierarchy in the very process of denaturalizing it...such performers "slum" because they adopt the speech, manners, and cultural reference points of a class remote from their own to assume some degree of mastery over what they simultaneously distance as socially other. They "reverse slum" because the gradient of impersonation is upward. (472)

In Cranford, while some of the women may actually have claimed a higher social status once, they are too poor to show it. Either way, the women's "reverse slumming" shows that performing social status is more important than living in reality.

Kucich's concept of "reverse slumming" illuminates these scenes in which etiquette takes precedence. In one example, Mrs. Forrester gives a party, but in order to hide her poverty, she pretends that she did not make or carry up the baked goods that her guests are eating. The party is a ruse:

> ...as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants' hall, second table, with a housekeeper and steward; instead of the one little charity-school maiden, whose short ruddy arms could never have been strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted in private by her mistress, who now sate in state, pretending not to know what cakes were sent up; though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge cakes. (7)

Propriety keeps the women from acknowledging Mrs. Forrester's poverty. The scene becomes a play, as they act out their roles as hostess, guests, and servant. Everyone knows it is an act, but they continue with the playacting to maintain stability. The humor and seriousness in this scene are closely connected. The women are using propriety to hide the fact that they are old, poor, and alone.

The Cranford Amazons fail to adapt to other environments that they consider below their social status. In another scene, Mary Smith, Miss Matty, and Miss Pole are visiting Miss Matty's former lover, Mr. Holbrook, at his humble abode. While eating, the women realize that they have only been given "two-pronged, black handled forks," unacceptable for eating the meal that is offered to them, ducks and green peas (40). Each of the women chooses a different way of handling the comedic situation. Miss Matty remains as respectful and elegant as she can be for a genteel woman, and picks the peas "one by one, on the point of the prongs" (40). Miss Pole, Mr. Holbrook's cousin, is unable to change her way of eating peas, and leaves "them on one side of her plate untasted, for they *would* drop between the prongs" (40). Mary Smith overcomes her disapproval of the utensils, and chooses to watch and imitate the host, who eats the peas by shoveling them in his "capacious mouth…by his large round-ended knife" (40). This scene demonstrates the tragicomedy: it is comedic in that the women are overly-anxious over how to act when given the wrong utensil, tragic in that they cannot let go of their propriety in order to enjoy the meal. The fact that the Cranford women cannot even change their eating habits suggests that they are also unable to adapt to the changes taking place in their culture. Rules govern the Cranford women, keeping them from living a full and abundant life.

The greater tragedy of Cranford is that the women mostly live on their own, spending much of their day in isolation with little to occupy them. There are no children in this

community. Margaret Croskery states in "Mothers without Children, Unity without Plot: *Cranford*'s Radical Charm," that the novel is "largely about women defined by their lack of husbands and children" (208). Miss Matty shares that in her dreams she has a little child that comes to her whenever "she is very sorry or very glad" (129). While Miss Matty mourns the fact that she never got to marry Mr. Holbrook, she reveals that her greatest tragedy is this "stranger yearning" in her heart every time she sees "a mother and her baby in her arms" (129). When her brother Peter runs away, it begins to kill Mrs. Jenkyns, making her cry bitter tears when she is alone, for to her it feels as if her favorite child is practically dead (69). This same heartbreak and tragedy is seen in Mrs. Brown, who loses six children, and tells her husband that "it will cut her heart cruel" and she will "go mad" if Phoebe, the seventh child, dies as well (131). Even Peter's jokingly dressing as his sister and carrying a pillow around like a baby has a hidden tragedy in it. While Peter intends for his playacting to be comical, it is also cruel because Deborah has never had a suitor and is unlikely to have children of her own.

As the Cranford women mourn their childless state, they try to find new ways to fulfill their needs as mothers. When Jessie's family dies, Miss Deborah Jenkyns goes with her to the funeral, although Jessie does not seem to "like this arrangement" (21). While Miss Deborah Jenkyns is being invasive, she takes this task of accompanying the young woman to the funeral seriously as if she is her mother, even wearing a bonnet that looks like a "hybrid bonnet, half helmet, half jockey-cap," suggesting that she is ready to go to war and win the battle or game for her young companion (22). Miss Deborah also takes in Mary Smith, and later young Flora Gordon, carrying for them in a motherly sense by influencing their tastes in literature and culture. The servants are also treated as children. Martha is treated like a child by Miss Matty. Miss Matty controls Martha's ability to have a "follower" and Martha in turn takes care of Miss

Matty when she faces financial trouble. When Martha has a baby, Miss Matty cares for her as if she were a granddaughter.

For other women in Cranford, their pets take the place of children. In one comedic example, Betty Barker looks upon her Alderney cow "as a daughter," even going so far to dress her cow in "dark grey flannel" when it becomes injured in a lime-pit (6). When Mrs. Jamieson's dog Carlo passes away, Miss Pole suggests that "Carlo's death might be the greater affliction" compared to her husband's death (113). "Betty Barker and the widow Mrs. Jamieson are hysterically, hyperbolically maternal only to their pets," performing their caregiver role with intense devotion (Gillooly 893). The comedy is that these women see their pets as beloved children; the tragedy is that they do not and cannot have children.

While the women care for their domestic pets like children, they themselves are also described as wild, exotic animals. When Mrs. Fitz-Adams returns to Cranford a widow, Miss Pole says that she reappears "as bold as a lion," suggesting that her widowhood has made her courageous and stronger (76). After Lady Glenmire has been in the community for a while, Mary says in her narration that she "made a very pleasant-looking dragon" (114). Miss Matty brings Wombwell, a traveling circus, to town because she desires to see an elephant so that "she might better imagine Peter riding one," only then also having to see the less desirable boa-constrictor (135). These descriptions of the women as beasts or desiring to see wild animals recalls and harkens back to Mary's analysis that Cranford is "in the possession of the Amazons" (1). While the Cranford women at first appear to be only old unmarried ladies, "the joke is on the reader, for these old ladies turn out to be the winners, the survivors, the hero" (Fowler 728). The women not only bear and overcome their various tragedies, but further, crave the exciting and the novel, despite their fear of it at the same time.

The ending of *Cranford* implies that the future of the town is peaceful. However, the tragedy of Cranford is not fully eradicated. Miss Matty's childlessness is the epitome of Cranford's tragedy in regards to its future existence. Miss Matty has a ghost child that haunts her at night; the child she never had. Miss Matty describes her interactions with the ghost child in an evening conversation with Mary:

> "Nay, my dear," - (and by a sudden blaze which sprang up from a fall of unstirred coals, I saw that her eyes were full of tears - gazing intently on some vision of what might have been) – "do you know, I dream sometimes that I have a little child - always the same - a little girl of about two years old; she never grows older, though I have dreamt about her for many years. I don't think I ever dream of any words or sounds she makes; she is very noiseless and still, but she comes to me when she is very sorry or very glad, and I have wakened with the clasp of her dear little arms round my neck. Only last night - perhaps because I had gone to sleep thinking of this ball for Phoebe - my little darling came in my dream, and put up her mouth to be kissed, just as I have seen real babies do to real mothers before going to bed." (128)

Miss Matty's confession about her relationship with the ghost child redeems the fact that Miss Matty has grown "sad and gray" and has "lost the knack" with children (128). However, the ghost child does not speak and never grows older. Peter's return means Miss Matty now has someone to enjoy life with in her last years, but his being there is also a reminder of all she has lost or will never experience. Miss Matty's life is a lonely and a lost one, making her the tragic figure in this story. She is overshadowed by her sister, unable to marry at the right age, loses the chance to marry Mr. Holbrook twice, has little education, no ability to break herself out of poverty, and is missing her dear brother Peter for several decades. Perhaps Miss Matty is

Cranford's "headless lady," her voice throughout the narrative one of grief. The reality is that Miss Matty will pass away, and there will be no children to carry on the Jenkyns name, history, and identity. The "headless lady" and ghost child emphasize that past afflictions cannot be revised. The years that one has lost cannot be re-made.

Conclusion

Both *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford* follow the pattern of a comic ending. *Mansfield Park* ends with a marriage that will save the estate. *Cranford* ends with a reunion that brings peace to the town. However, the marriage and the reunion cannot wash away the darker aspects of each narrative. In my reading of *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford*, two patterns emerge in the context of comedy and tragedy. The first pattern is the recurring need for equilibrium in households and communities in order for peace to be realized. When equilibrium is not achieved, injustice occurs. The comings and goings of *Cranford* and *Mansfield Park* outline this theme. When Sir Thomas and Mr. Jenkyns enter on the playacting scenes, they both cause tragic ends to the comedic world. Both fathers betray their families by neglecting their children's need for acceptance. Sir Thomas ignores his children while Mr. Jenkyns refuses to listen to his children. For *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas' return is foreboding and mournful. Moreover, Austen uses his return to heighten the novel's intensity by placing it in between the first and second volumes of *Mansfield Park*. By eradicating Mansfield Park of comedic relief, Sir Thomas destabilizes the family's environment, making it more susceptible to physical and psychological suffering. In *Cranford*, Mr. Jenkyn's witness of Peter's playacting compels Peter's departure. By losing Peter, the community loses its lighthearted, playful, and humorous nature, letting Deborah's more serious and draconian personality set the tone for the town.

As Sir Thomas' return dampens the comedic story, Peter's return reunites the community with his comedic stories. While the women live and thrive in the domestic realm, Peter, like Sir Thomas, is away in exotic places for large portions of the text. Peter's return causes a stir in the community. For *Cranford*, Peter's return to the community is joyous and playful, allowing for both Miss Matty and Peter to finally feel "most comfortable and contented" (Gaskell 188).

Peter's return is necessary to prevent the novel from becoming too bleak. In fact, Peter's return is truly that of "Cranford's lost child finally [reappearing]"; the beaten son who was lost is now found (Croskery 213). Miss Matty will never have children of her own, nor will her ghost child come to life; however, she is reunited with her long-lost brother, whose entrance into the town gives her stability and joy.

Like Peter, Fanny's return to Mansfield from Portsmouth brings equilibrium back to the park. She is able to satisfy Lady Bertram's needs by marrying Edmund and bringing into the household at Mansfield Park her younger sister, Susan, who is expected to care for Lady Bertram in the same way that Fanny once did. Fanny's marriage to Edmund saves him from the grasp of Mary Crawford, suggesting that if he had married Mary it might have led him to a tragic end. Indeed, Edmund and Fanny begin to live at the parsonage at Mansfield Park, "which under each of its two former owners, Fanny had never been able to approach but with some painful sensation of restraint or alarm" (Austen 439). The irony is that Mrs. Norris and Mary Crawford never suspected that Fanny would marry someone of such high rank and respectability, nor suspect that she would live in their former home, residing where her two former adversaries lived. The comedic ending is thus a sentimental one as well as a humorous one – Fanny's ending is too charmingly wonderful for an audience that has been on her side since her humble beginnings.

The second pattern that emerges is the lifelong loneliness that lingers throughout both narratives. Loneliness is a commonality among all the characters. Fanny Price, Mary Crawford, Mary Smith, and Peter Jenkyns are not stagnant, but constantly moving from place to place, isolating them from their original home and families. Others, like Miss Matty, choose to stay at home despite their desire to leave, but home becomes a lonely place as family members

disappear, escape, or pass on. Fanny Price, Mary Crawford, and Mary Smith do not fully belong anywhere. Peter is estranged from his family, and Miss Matty chooses not to marry her love, Mr. Holbrook. Mary Crawford may marry or experience companionship, but the likelihood of her becoming a spinster who travels from home to home increases over time.

Miss Matty and Fanny both experience lifelong loneliness more than all the other characters. Like Fanny, Miss Matty is gentle, child-like, and alone. Miss Matty's loneliness dissipates when Peter returns to Cranford, yet they cannot rewind the clock. There is a sympathy between them that they have missed out on many years together. Similarly, while Fanny Price's marriage to her friend and cousin Edmund means she will not be alone in the world, Edmund is her only friend at Mansfield Park. Despite Edmund's good intentions, Fanny has no one else to spend time with and no one else who will advocate for her best interests.

Throughout this thesis I have tried to show that comedic relief is needed in *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford* in order to prevent the dark aspects of either world to overcome the narratives. By incorporating comedy, tragedy is only occasional or for finite periods of time. For both texts, tragedy grows out of what one person does to another. In addition, in both narratives, it is the parents and guardians whose actions (or inactions) destroy family relationships. Women are largely the ones who reap the tragic results, keeping them from living a full and abundant life. Peter is the exception, because he is sent into exile by his father. Peter's exile produces tragic consequences by tearing apart the Jenkyns family. In the end, Peter's reunion with Miss Matty is the ultimate relationship that amalgamates the family, and ultimately the community. *Mansfield Park* does not have a Peter, meaning that equilibrium is never fully realized, despite the perceived happy conclusion by the reader. Do these narratives have a lasting peace? The narratives state that peace is restored. However, both narratives also suggest that because there

have been small aggressions and tragic events, times of peace are only fleeting. Performing or playacting happiness disguises the tragedy that is occurring behind the curtain.

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